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ABSTRACT

A crucial concept in Francis Christensen's principles of writing involves the "addition," which may be construed as any grammatical unit that is not a main clause. Obviously the effect of rhetorical writing derives mainly from the number of additions as well as from their placement and function within the single sentence. By means of addition, students in writing courses, regardless of their different levels, gradually learn to generate complex rhetorical sentences. The student can begin by writing a grammatical sentence upon the blackboard, representing its various additions and main clause by means of a special notation. Then, either independently or with the help of classmates, the student adds or rearranges units in the symbolic notation until everyone agrees that the form of a basic periodic or a mixed sentence, for example, is attained. With the formula on the blackboard in front of them, the members of the class can then create another sentence that fulfills the formula. The method in fact becomes a heuristic when a student gradually adds phrases and clauses to a base main clause. More importantly, when taught this new model of the writing process, students realize that whole sentences in the paragraph (and individual paragraphs within a paragraph bloc) often function in the same way as additions to the single sentence, and that paragraphs and even entire essays can be generated according to the same model used for sentences. (HOD)

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Christensen Revamped: The Rhetorical Sentence as a Model of The Writing Process

Understanding how the rhetorical sentence can provide a new model of the writing process first requires reviewing some of Francis Christensen's principles. More specifically, comprehending that model closely depends upon a detailed method for writing rhetorical sentences conceived according to Christensen's adapted principles of writing. Consequently, several following paragraphs of this essay are devoted to an explanation of the method for writing the rhetorical sentences upon which an understanding of the model is based. In his directions for generating ideas for both the sentence and the paragraph, Christensen begins with a remark of John Erskine, the originator of the Great Books courses: "What you say [in a sentence] is found not in the noun but in what you add to qualify the noun. . . . The noun, the verb, and the main clause serve merely as the base on which meaning will rise. . . . The modifier is the essential part of any sentence."[1] Christensen explains that "the typical sentence of modern English, the kind we can best spend our efforts trying to teach, is what we may call the cumulative sentence. The main clause, which may or may not have a sentence modifier before it, advances the discussion; but the additions move backward, as in this clause, to modify the statement of the main clause or more often to explicate or exemplify it, so that the sentence has a flowing and ebbing movement, advancing to a new position and then pausing to consolidate it, leaping and lingering as the popular ballad does" (pp. 355-56). Unlike the classic periodic sentence, which Christensen terms "cold-packaged," the cumulative sentence supposedly represents the mind thinking. According to Christensen, "the main clause . . .

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exhausts the mere fact of the idea; logically, there is nothing more to say. The additions stay with the same idea, probing its bearings and implications, exemplifying it or seeking an analogy or metaphor for it, or reducing it to details. Thus the mere form of the cumulative sentence generates ideas" (p. 356).[2]

A crucial concept in Christensen's scheme involves the "addition," which may be construed as any grammatical unit that is not a main clause.[3] All subordinate clauses, absolute constructions, verbals, prepositional phrases, participial phrases, and appositives can be regarded as additions. Obviously the effect of rhetorical writing derives mainly from the number of additions as well as from their placement and function within the single sentence. It follows that additions cluster in only three places within a sentence--at the beginning, middle, or end. These places correspond to those in which modifiers appear in, respectively, the cumulative, mixed, and periodic rhetorical sentences. By means of the addition, students in writing courses, regardless of their different levels, gradually learn to generate complex rhetorical sentences.

The following two rhetorical examples clarify ideas presented in the previous paragraph of this paper. First, a cumulative sentence in shameless imitation of William Faulkner: "Miss Emily defied the townspeople, closing herself within the tomb-like house, which the old Colonel had left her, withdrawing in a dark mood of self-pity and hate for her tormentors, men and women unborn when she first--as a girl--felt the faint stirrings of resentment over her imprisoning fate." Second, a mixed creation in imitation of F. Scott Fitzgerald: "When the blooms of spring appeared, fluttering like gay rags upon elderly limbs, Ben thought of her so far away, surrounded by a crowd of

admiring youths tanned by a Florida sun which never moved." If we were defining these sentences according to traditional rhetorics, we would simply say that they achieve their special forms because subordinate phrases and clauses follow or precede and follow the main clause. Generally, no number of subordinate phrases and clauses would be specified. If we wished to be more precise, we might say that five, possibly six, additions follow the short main clause in the cumulative sentence just presented while two principal additions precede and three follow the main clause in the mixed example. And if we wished to refine our description even further, we might adopt this notation for additions: "When the blooms of spring appeared, fluttering like gay rags upon elderly limbs, Ben thought of her so far away, surrounded by a crowd of admiring youths tanned by a Florida sun which never moved." $a_{dc} + a_{vp} + mc + a_{vp} + a_{vp} + a_{dc}$. (The notation has the following values: a=addition, mc=main clause, dc=dependent clause, vp=verbal phrase).[4] A more detailed anatomy reveals the prepositional phrases modifying participles: $a_{dc} + a_{vp}(a_{pp}) + mc + a_{vp}(a_{pp} + a_{pp}) + a_{vp}(a_{pp}) + a_{dc}$.

At this point, my reader must be wondering about the practical uses of such an abstract set of symbols in the composition classroom. There are at least three advantages to using this analytical method based upon the addition in the freshman or advanced composition course. These advantages accrue not only in the writing class in which the new model described below is introduced but also generally in any writing course in which the subject of rhetoric or stylistics is stressed.

First, and most importantly, the method suggests a <u>more detailed</u> approach to the writing of rhetorical sentences than any currently available. The student initially writes a grammatical sentence upon the blackboard, repre-

senting its various additions and main clause (or clauses) by means of the special notation. Obviously a fairly developed knowledge of grammar is required on the part of the student--a knowledge that the instructor will have to develop through exercises during the beginning weeks of the course. The student, either independently or with the help of classmates, then adds or rearranges units in the symbolic notation until everyone agrees that the form of a basic periodic or a mixed sentence, for example, is attained. With the formula on the blackboard in front of them, the members of a class--usually as a group--then create another sentence that fulfills the formula. Once the new sentence is written, stylistic variations can be played upon it; more intricate balances, antitheses, and repetitions can be created through the writing of a more detailed formula for the group-generated sentence, which is then realized in actual practice. For example, the Fitzgerald-like sentence with which we began might eventually become something like the following: "When the blooms of spring appeared, fluttering like gay rags upon old limbs twisted by many winters, Ben thought of her, a blossom too but one far away, surrounded by a crowd of worshipping youths tanned by a Florida sun which never moved."

Secondly, the method indicates how a mastery of rhetoric depends upon a basic understanding of grammar. The two subjects no longer appear to be isolated topics in a writing course. Rhetoric again can be made the master of grammar.

Thirdly, by using the special notation based upon the addition, a teacher of either freshman or advanced composition can define more fully the potential types of rhetorical sentences. The traditional categories of periodic, loose, balanced, and mixed appear general and untuned to possibility once the method

based on the addition and special notation is practiced and complex phrasing and rhythms are created. The notation provides a means for creative discovery; its language can sensitively suggest prose rhythms and unique rhetorical combinations. The method in fact becomes a heuristic when a student gradually adds phrases and clauses to a base main clause.

The mixed sentence--as taught by the special notation outlined in the first part of this paper--has hitherto unexplained relevance for the writing process in general. The latter part of the mixed sentence can be generated by the cumulative method. The former half, essentially periodic, requires a more controlled phrasing and intellectual packaging. In other words, the mixed sentence is a paradigm of the creative process as Western writers and thinkers have traditionally defined it. Representing the liberating, "floating," spontaneous quality of Romantic creativity, the additions following the main clause in the mixed sentence reflect the inspired mind, freed from all constraints. The absolute constructions, the complex verbals best admit the kind of untrammeled qualification and discovery consistent with Romantic aesthetics, whether expressed by a David or a Coleridge or an F. Scott Fitzgerald. (Not surprisingly, most of Christensen's examples of complex cumulative sentences--generated in the throes of composition--come from fiction or the closely related mode of expository narration.) Representing the self-contained, crafted intellectual (perhaps symmetrical) formal quality of Classical creativity, the additions preceding the main clause in the mixed sentence reflect the contemplative mind, attentive to tradition and the rhetorical and intellectual needs of the reader and the subject. Clarifying prepositional phrases, adverbial dependent clauses, and phrases containing present and past participles admit the information necessary for preparing the reader to comprehend fully the meaning of the subsequent main clause.

Thus the rhetorically mixed sentence, fully articulated according to the special pedagogy and notation described in the first part of this paper, represents the creative process well. No other grammatical or rhetorical construct--to my knowledge--approximates the mixed sentence's condensation of the Romantic and Classical habits of the creative mind. In light of this fact, the mixed sentence offers opportunities for conceiving of the writing process in a new way. The elements of the essay can be viewed, in many respects, as versions of the dynamic represented in the mixed sentence. Or, regarded from the opposite viewpoint, a combination of two kinds of creativity, necessary for any good expository essay, is distilled in the mixed sentence--an epitome.

The value of the creative dynamic represented by the mixed sentence, taught according to the special pedagogy, can be seen in three different elements of the writing process: pre-writing, the paragraph bloc, and the essay as a whole. Alternately calculated and spontaneous, the mixed sentence as presented is a composite of pre-writing techniques. An analysis of the most popular current methods of pre-writing reveals that they can be characterized according to their ability either to release the student writer's mind or to direct it systematically toward the discovery of new ideas. In other words, pre-writing techniques currently reflect the two major modes of creativity discussed earlier--scarcely a surprising fact. Directed brainstorming, especially as described in a text like Maxine Hairston's Successful Writing, obviously is a method aimed at liberating the writer's thoughts without regard to such arbitrary standards as correctness of grammar, spelling, sentence structure, and punctuation. By encouraging the student to turn off his or her writing censor, brainstorming fosters the primitive within all of us--the

undisciplined id which has so much to say so formlessly. In this respect, such a pre-writing technique as brainstorming corresponds to those relatively spontaneous, free-floating additions following the main clause in mixed sentences--additions that are usually more inspired, more "struck in the white heat of creativity." Conversely, more directed kinds of pre-writing, such as those based on Tagmemics, Burke's Pentad, or various questions deriving from the Aristotelian topics, correspond to those "cold-packaged" additions preceding the main clause of the mixed sentence--additions that (in expository writing at least) often have the appearance of more conscious fabrication. In the early part of the mixed sentence (as in Tagmemics, for instance), self-discipline, intellectual coolness, devotion to following a schematic--these are all values.

More importantly, when taught a new model of the writing process based upon dynamics condensed in the mixed sentence, students realize that whole sentences in the paragraph (and individual paragraphs within a paragraph bloc) often function in the same way that additions do within the single sentence, and that paragraphs and even entire essays can be generated according to the same model used for sentences. Richard Braddock has shown that writers often let a "macro-topic sentence"--the phrase is Josephine Miles's--or a large-scale generalization determine the development of several subsequent paragraphs, some of which may lack the traditional topic sentence taught by freshman textbooks.[5] In fact, Braddock found, in his statistical survey of expository paragraphs, that many professionally written paragraphs lack the consciously-placed, obvious topic sentence. Admittedly, the majority of his writing samples were taken from popular magazines, in which an impressionistic paragraphing typical of journalism dominates. Nevertheless, his findings strongly bear upon the new model for the writing process under discussion.

They suggest that writers often create paragraph blocs corresponding to the structure of the mixed sentence, paragraph blocs in which a central assertion is followed by several sentences or paragraphs that qualify or clarify the statement. The subsequent units of discourse often are less calculated and less controlled than the carefully plotted sentences or paragraphs that prepare the reader for understanding the value of the central assertion. Conversely, earlier sentences or paragraphs resemble crafted additions preceding the main clause in the mixed sentence. With a "macro-topic sentence" embedded in a central paragraph preceded and followed by paragraphs composed according to radically different creative acts, this method for writing a large unit of discourse combines the best of the two major techniques for composing paragraphs: generative paragraphing and the exercise of producing a paragraph through placing a topic sentence at the beginning, in the middle, or at the end of the paragraph. In this respect, these subsequent sentences or paragraphs correspond to the cumulative additions following the main clause in a mixed sentence.

Obviously classroom exercises can be devised for writing single paragraphs according to the heuristic used for generating a paragraph bloc. In fact, by training with single paragraphs, students prepare themselves for composing the paragraph bloc described in the preceding section of this paper. After students devise the sentence containing the central thought that they want to communicate in the paragraph, they write those sentences which clarify, qualify, or explain the ramifications of the central idea; and they do so in a relatively spontaneous, uncritical manner. They then ask themselves what information is necessary, or desirable, in order to appreciate fully the significance of the central assertion. This information makes up

those sentences leading up to the central idea. After practicing this method, students may wish occasionally to create a paragraph in a paragraph bloc according to it, if for no other reason than as a reminder of the procedure governing the generation of the paragraph bloc itself.

This approach to writing key paragraphs and paragraph blocs can be used for the expository essay as a whole. During initial drafts, a provisionary thesis sentence might be placed in the understood middle of the essay, with paragraphs corresponding to cumulative additions following it and with more periodic, cold-packaged paragraphs preceding it. This model of the whole essay works best for those papers in which the writer must first gain a relatively skeptical reader's assent, or for those papers in which a technical understanding is necessary before a reader can fully grasp the importance of the main idea and its consequences.

Clearly, what has been proposed in this paper is only that--a new model of the writing process. Yet it is a model that can, in certain circumstances, liberate student writers and provide them with a heuristic for making their writing more detailed and responsive to the contours of their thinking.

Notes

[1]"A Generative Rhetoric of the Sentence," The Writing Teacher's Source-book," ed. Gary Tate and Edward P. J. Corbett (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), p. 355. Christensen's essay originally appeared in Notes Toward a New Rhetoric, ed. Bonniejean Christensen (New York: Harper and Row, 1968).

[2]In "Some Tentative Strictures on Generative Rhetoric (College English, 31 [November, 1969]), Sabina Thorne Johnson notes that Christensen does not fully appreciate the value of the balanced and the periodic sentence. A steady stream of cumulative sentences can make an expository essay appear impressionistic. Christensen believed that cumulative sentences best reflect "the mind thinking"; yet they can also give the impression that the thinking in an essay consists of afterthoughts--repeated revisings of a basic idea. Moreover, Johnson remarks that not all cumulative sentences necessarily "advance" a discussion; not all sentences are "generative." Maxine Hairston implicitly makes this point in Successful Writing (New York: Norton, 1981), pp. 156-60. Johnson concludes: "Christensen seems to believe that form can generate content. I don't believe that it can, especially if the content is of an analytical or critical nature" (p. 159). Christensen may have over-stressed the role of the cumulative sentence and its free modifiers in exposi-tory writing, which generally has a higher proportion of relative and subordi-nate clauses than descriptive or narrative writing does. Nonetheless, Chris-tensen's notion of the addition directs us toward a new model of the writing process.

[3]For Christensen, the addition is primarily a generative principle rather than a kind of grammatical unit. See Michael Grady, "A Conceptual Rhetoric of the Composition," College Composition and Communication, 22 (December, 1971),

351-52. Nonetheless, rhetoricians who have based their research on Christensen's scheme have generally understood the concept of addition in grammatical terms. (See note 4)

[4]An earlier grammatical notation based upon Christensen's generative rhetoric appears in Frank J. D'Angelo, "Imitation and Style," College Composition and Communication, 24 (October, 1973), 286-88. D'Angelo's notation, however, differs from mine both in nature and rhetorical purpose. But see his important article.

[5]"The Frequency and Placement of Topic Sentences in Expository Prose," Research in the Teaching of English, 8 (Winter, 1974), 287-302.